REFORMING THE NSC: SOME CAUTIONARY LESSONS FROM HISTORY

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It is an honor to appear before this committee on this important subject. The Project on National Security Reform has produced a sophisticated analysis and made important recommendations intended to strengthen US national security policy integration on behalf of the president. National Security Adviser James Jones has declared that the Obama NSC will be "dramatically different" from its predecessors, with broader substantive scope. And the President issued last month Presidential Policy Directive #1 mandating broad participation in national security policymaking at the presidential, principals, and deputies levels, and below.

The need for such reform seems undeniable. The United States faces a broad array of challenges—within the political-military sphere that is the NSC's longstanding purview, but broadened to include terrorism at home and abroad, global climate change, and most urgently the worldwide economic crisis. The institutions currently available to meet that challenge are, in the main, institutions created in the late 1940s for a very different world. It is hard to argue against "a bold, but carefully crafted plan of comprehensive reform " of these institutions so that they can address 21st century problems in an integrated manner. (Exec Sum i) The Project on National Security Reform (PNSR) has devoted enormous effort to this undertaking, and its conclusions merit serious consideration.

Yet as shown by our most recent effort at organizational reconstruction—the creation of the Department of Homeland Security—bold changes do not necessarily bring benign results.

Let me concentrate here on two core PNSR recommendations for organizational change:

1) The creation of a President's Security Council (PSC) to encompass not only the subjects currently addressed by the NSC and the HSC, but with international economic and energy policy "fully integrated" as well (Exec Sum xi); and
2) Statutory creation of a Director of National Security (presumably replacing the current presidential national security assistant), supported by a statutory executive secretary.

[1] Co-author, with Ivo H. Daalder, of *In The Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisers and the Presidents They Served—From JFK to George W. Bush* (Simon and Schuster, 2009). I received grants of $4318 and $1098 from the US Department of State and the US Embassy Tokyo, respectively, in support of a week's program as an Embassy-sponsored lecturer in Japan during March 2008.

The impressive members of the "Guiding Coalition" who signed the PNSR report have backgrounds overwhelmingly in national security policy, traditionally defined. It is to their credit that they see the need for broadened jurisdiction, but no one in the group seems to have had senior-level experience in addressing economic issues, domestic or international. The historic NSC has proved progressively less able to oversee these economic issues effectively. Beginning with Richard Nixon, Presidents have established parallel economic policy coordination institutions outside the NSC to handle them, with the National Economic Council established by Bill Clinton just the latest manifestation.

This is no accident. International economic issues are not simply an extension of national security issues, but they reflect a set of challenges arising from a different set of forces, processes, and institutions. They are at least as much linked to domestic economics as they are to the political-military issues that have driven the NSC (and would likely drive a PSC). They involve different forms of analysis, different instruments of policy, different governmental institutions—as the current global economic crisis makes abundantly clear. Their current urgency demands that they have at least coequal status in the White House—an adviser and council addressing these issues in their own terms, not wedged within a "security" perspective. Of course Larry Summers and James Jones should coordinate with one another, and they have engaged a capable joint deputy—Michael Froman—to be sure that international economic policy draws on both of their perspectives. But to go further, to subordinate economic issues within a Presidential Security Council, would be to go against both logic and experience.[2]

I am not as familiar with energy or environmental policy, but I suspect the same considerations may apply. Perhaps President Obama is not wrong to have engaged separate senior advisers for national security, economics, and energy/environment—though keeping them from working at cross-purposes on issues that overlap remains a daunting task.

So I am skeptical about a PSC—at least one going beyond merging the NSC and the HSC, which the Obama administration seems likely to do. I have a different set of doubts about establishing a "Director of National Security" in the White House.

Presumably this official would replace the current national security adviser, though the Executive Summary is not clear on that point. The position would be established by legislation, though no recommendation is made on whether or not she or he would be subject to Senate confirmation. Supported by a statutory executive secretary, this Director would not only be "the principal assistant to the president on all matters related to national security," like the current NSA, but he would also be charged with administering a wide range of planning and integrating instruments—an overall strategy, planning guidance, a resource document, a network of interagency teams, etc. (505) The Director would be asked to combine the

[2] The language of the full report seems more nuanced than the Executive Summary: it limits the integration to "economic and energy issues with security implications" (500), whatever that precisely means. But would there still be an NEC?

planning tasks of Eisenhower's Bobby Cutler and here-and-now issue management tasks of Kennedy's McGeorge Bundy.

Whence would come his power? What would make the departments and agencies commit their time and best people to this elaborate exercise, whatever its abstract merit? The PNSR report uses words like "empower," suggesting that mandating these activities is the same as making them real and effective. In practice, however, whatever the change in title, the Director would gain his power overridingly from his relationship with the president, just as national security advisers have. Would the president *want him (or her)* to spend his time this way? Eisenhower wanted Bobby Cutler to do this, but he also had Andy Goodpaster, who handled his daily decisionmaking and crisis management—often outside the formal system. Kennedy didn't want it, and he and Bundy transformed to national security adviser job to one of supporting the president's daily national security business—and connecting his senior officials to him and to one another. None of Kennedy's successors wanted an Eisenhower-Cutler planning system (save Nixon and Kissinger, who employed an improved version for about three months). There is no reason to believe that Obama, whose cerebral informality resembles Kennedy's, would want one either.

The "Director" would then have a choice. Persist in the elaborate integration mandate knowing that the president, at best, tolerated it, and knowing that one day agency officials would learn that this process was not really driving presidential decisions? Or respond to what the president really wanted him to do, delegating formal system management to the executive secretary. Then there would be two layers—an interagency planning process below, disconnected from the president and his principal advisers.

There is much that is good in this sophisticated report—in its understanding of many of the problems of the current system, in its focus on improving national security budgeting and personnel. But I do not think the key organizational recommendations survive careful analysis. So I do not think they would improve matters in the unlikely event that they were formally adopted. For in the end, it is "the president, stupid." It is he (she one day) who drives the system. His operating preferences and decision style are what any senior White House aide must accommodate. To encumber that aide with heavy formal responsibilities is to increase his distance from the president, weakening their joint capacity to achieve such national security policy coherence as our system of governance will allow.